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ABSTRACT

The paper discusses the changing role of the teacher in meeting the special educational needs of children in Scotland, with particular emphasis on two recently published reports--"The Education of Pupils with Learning Difficulties" and the Warnock Report "Special Educational Needs." The roles of class, subject, and special teachers are considered. (SBH)

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THE CHANGING ROLE OF THE TEACHER IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

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THE CHANGING ROLE OF THE TEACHER IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

In the last twenty years the role of the teacher in all spheres of education has changed and education has become much more child-centred. This is particularly true of special education where if the word "special" is to mean something it implies concentration on individual needs which have been assessed in a multi-professional way and the teacher or teachers concerned are members of a team whose aim is to secure the maximum level of independent functioning possible for the handicapped child in a family and community setting. That aim is the basis for my look at the changing role of the teacher in meeting the special educational needs of children.

There have recently been published in Scotland two reports which have a great bearing on the role of the teacher in special education. The first of these is a report by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Schools entitled "The Education of Pupils with Learning Difficulties" and the second is the Warnock Report "Special Educational Needs" a document which is a United Kingdom document applying to England and Wales as well as to Scotland. The Warnock Report adopted a new concept of special education. It is seen as being much broader than the traditional concept of education by special methods appropriate for particular categories of children. It no longer sees special education as that provided only in special schools, special classes or units for children with particular types of disability. It puts forward the notion that special education is any form of additional help whenever it is provided and wherever it is provided from birth to maturity to overcome educational difficulty. The committee expressed the view that to describe a child as handicapped does not convey the type of

educational help required nor therefore the type of provision needed. The concept of special educational need was adopted and once that decision was taken, the Report was dealing with not the traditional two per cent of the child population but a much larger proportion estimated to be about one in six children at any time and one in five at some time who, during their school career, will require some form of special educational provision. Special educational provision was taken to mean (i) effective access on a full or part-time basis to teachers with appropriate qualifications or substantial experience or both; (ii) effective access on a full or part-time basis to other professionals with appropriate training and (iii) an educational and physical environment with the necessary aids, equipment and resources appropriate to the child's special needs. He may need a special or modified curriculum and particular attention may have to be paid to the social structure and emotional climate in which his education takes place.

The other report to which I referred "The Education of Pupils with Learning Difficulties" clearly has a close tie-up with the Warnock Report in that it deals with remedial education in Scottish primary and secondary schools. If the new concept of special education advocated by Warnock is adopted then most of those pupils at present receiving remedial education would be included in the one in five pupils who have special educational needs.

The Inspectorate Report however makes an important observation on the interpretation by most schools of the term "remedial education". Inspectors found that schools tend to use the term in respect of help to pupils who have difficulties in the basic skills of reading and computation.

"Their main objective is to get all pupils to an acceptable level of reading competence in the belief that, if they acquire this fundamental skill, they will then be able to cope with all their other learning difficulties." Our observation in Scottish schools would certainly lead us to question such a belief. Many pupils can read in the sense that they have mastered the decoding skills but have very considerable learning difficulty in that they cannot cope with the ideas and concepts associated with their studies in say science, mathematics or social subjects - to say nothing of the language in which these ideas and concepts are expressed. So the Warnock term "special educational needs" must encompass not just existing interpretations of special and remedial education but this wider interpretation of remedial education - at least wider than that which has been traditionally accepted in Scotland. It may indeed make the one in five figure a conservative estimate of the size of the school population with special educational needs.

One additional important way in which the two reports link is in the use of the term "learning difficulties". The Warnock Report recommends that the use of the terms "educationally subnormal" and "mentally handicapped" be discontinued and that they be replaced by "children with learning difficulties". The learning difficulties may be of a mild, moderate or severe degree as well as being in some instances specific.

Both reports then have important implications for the role of the teacher and "teacher" here refers to the professional with a distinctive contribution to make at different levels corresponding to the degree and nature of learning difficulty and/or complexity of special educational needs of the child or children concerned. It goes without saying that

if we are discussing the special educational needs of one of five children, the class or subject teacher will be heavily involved with or without specialist help. So we must look at the role of the class teacher. He must shoulder the responsibility for identifying and remedying (with specialist help where necessary) a wider range of learning problems than has hitherto been the practice in many of our schools in Scotland - and perhaps elsewhere in the world. The specialist help will come either from within the resources of the school in the form of a member of staff with a special qualification in dealing with children with learning difficulties or from outwith the school in the form of a member of a peripatetic team of specialists eg those with a qualification to teach children with sensory handicaps. Or the specialist help may come from the resources of the special school which within the Warnock recommendations will still have a distinctive contribution to make, catering for the following groups of children:

i) children with severe or complex physical, sensory or intellectual disabilities who require special facilities, teaching methods or expertise that it would be impracticable to provide in ordinary schools;

ii) children with severe emotional or behaviour disorders who have very great difficulty in forming relationships with others or whose behaviour is so extreme or unpredictable that it causes severe disruption in an ordinary school or inhibits the educational progress of other children;

iii) children with less severe disabilities, often in combination, who despite special help, do not perform well in an ordinary school and

are more likely to thrive in the more intimate communal and educational setting of a special school.

Both reports assign to the class or subject teacher probably the most important role of all especially insofar as the bulk of children with special educational needs are concerned. The majority of pupils who will require special education in special schools from the age of five will have been identified long before they enter the compulsory stages of schooling and where this has not been done at birth or in the very earliest years of the child's life, it is hoped that these children will be picked up in the greatly extended provision of pre-school education. Warnock recognised however that there will still be children who are transferred as at present from mainstream education to special schools because although their disabilities are not severe, they do require the particular environment and facilities which a good special school can provide. The majority of the one in five however will remain within the ordinary school and the class or subject teacher's crucial role is firstly in identification and then in providing appropriate education, with or without the help of specialists.

The Warnock Report describes five stages of assessment in the discovery of children in school with special needs, the first three of which are school-based. It is worth looking for a moment at these three stages because within them the bulk of the children who require special help will be identified and suitably catered for in the ordinary school. At stage 1 the class or subject teacher will consult the headteacher about a pupil who is showing signs of having special educational needs. Although the Warnock Report says that the headteacher will be consulted, I expect that, while this will in all likelihood be the case in primary schools, in

secondary schools in Scotland the head of a subject department or a member of the guidance staff is most likely to be the first point of referral at stage 1. The headteacher or the person to whom he has delegated responsibility at this stage will be responsible for gathering all the information about the child's performance in school, together with other pertinent information that is available from medical, social and other sources including the parents. He and the class or subject teacher will then decide on what action is to be taken within the competence of the school. This may mean that the child's education will continue without change but subject to review, or the headteacher or head of department will advise within their competence on say a change of method. It may be, however, that after consideration they feel that the problem is such that they need more expert help. This is stage 2 of school-based assessment when the headteacher and class teacher will discuss the child's difficulties with a teacher with training and expertise in special education who will be either a member of the school staff or a local advisory teacher. He will carry out a further assessment of the child's needs and will advise the teacher on how to handle the problem in the classroom or will prescribe a special programme which he will supervise. If the child subsequently fails to make the hoped-for progress or if after this stage 2 consultation, the headteacher, class teacher and advisory teacher feel they need more specialised help with the problem, they will call on the services of a profesisonal such as a peripatetic teacher of the deaf or visually handicapped, an educational psychologist or social worker or a member of the health service. The outsome of such consultation will be that arrangements will be made using the ordinary school's staff or

resources supplemented where necessary to meet the needs which have been identified. Where the resources readily available in the ordinary school are not adequate to meet these needs then the child will be referred onwards for assessment at stages 4 and 5 by a multi-professional team, the stages here again being differentiated by the amount of specialist input required. The child assessed at this stage may remain for his education within the ordinary school with such additional help as is prescribed by the team or he may be transferred to a special school. One form of provision for children with special educational needs within the ordinary school will be a unit or resource centre where a pupil may attend on a full or part-time basis, taught by a specially trained teacher who will liaise closely with class or subject teachers. The child in attendance at this unit may either be withdrawn from the mainstream for some specialist help for a small proportion of the day or he may attend the special unit for most of the day with placement in regular classes for some subjects or he may be in the unit for the whole of the day with opportunities provided for social integration.

Now that is the background against which we can look at the roles of the various teachers involved. These teachers are the class and subject teachers, the specialist teachers who are school based and the peripatitic teachers and specialist teachers in a special school who may also be used in an advisory capacity in an ordinary school.

For these proposals to work - and on paper there is no reason why they shouldn't work - (but "the ideal" is sometimes pretty far removed from "the actual"), - there requires to be a fundamental change of attitude on the part of many class and subject teachers. Here we may look briefly

at the definition of the word "role". This is the interpretation by a person or group of the behaviour associated with a particular social "position" or "status". As Westwood points out in Education Research (1967) status and role may be seen as opposite sides of the same coin. Now as far as the class or subject teacher is concerned different groups of people with whom he associates may see him as performing different roles and this is where role conflict can arise. The pupils, the parents, colleagues, the headteacher, inspectors, the educational pyschologist, the doctor may all see him as having distinctive role in respect of a particular child or group of children. Expectations may differ in important respects.

Status in teaching can be related to the level of work you perform. The teacher teaching an academic subject to the sixth form or in senior high school can have status far beyond that of the teacher in the special school in the eyes of his collleagues in education and of the community in general. The lower the social status of the school and its pupils, the more difficult it can be for the teacher to gain respect from working in it, either indirectly from the community generally or more directly from pupils and parents. This applies to special schools and to remedial departments within comprehensive schools. This difference in status is related I believe in part to the kind of professional preparation provided in the past for teachers. The subject teacher's preparation has stressed the academic knowledge of his subject which he must demonstrate whereas the preparation of the special education teacher has been more child- than subject-centred. Teachers become categorised by the work they do. Status is clearly something you earn and while the subject teacher has

patently earned his status through academic achievement, the teacher of children with special educational needs requires to earn a similar status as a specialist in children's learning difficulties through the completion of a course which is as rigorous and demanding as the subject specialist's and as a result of which he demonstrates skills which are not possessed by the subject specialist. Indeed the more subject specialists we can recruit to these courses on children with learning difficulties the better, for they will have a dual qualification. Much of what I have said in respect of status relates to the secondary school but the differences exist also in primary school where again the level of the work you undertake determines your status. In order to redress the balance then we must have highly qualified specialists in learning difficulties who are not only eligible for promoted posts comparable to subject specialist but who, if they have the combined qualification, are seen as having additional status. A similar situation would apply in primary schools.

The class or subject teacher

I have digressed somewhat on the topic of status but it is important when we consider the working relationships of the three types of teachers already mentioned. Let us return to the role of the class teacher. The change of attitude to which I referred earlier comes about when the academic subject content is complemented by a knowledge of individual differences. This is at present more satisfactorily achieved in the training of primary school teachers who in Scotland have three years of professional training than of secondary school teachers who have one year of professional training but even in the case of primary school teachers much remains to be done to secure the outlook, the level of knowledge and expertise which will make

the recommendations of Warnock associated with the various stages of assessment realisable - to say nothing of what requires to be done in respect of subject teachers in secondary schools.

Through pre-service and in-service courses class and subject teachers will have to acquire a more thorough knowledge of child development so that they can detect abnormalities in development at the different stages and an ability to observe children. This means looking at the child and the way he is tackling a problem rather than solely at what he is learning. They will need to acquire an appreciation of the range of special educational needs of the stage or subject taught and of the practical steps they can take to meet these needs within the classroom. This requires a closer look at the way in which groups of children are managed within a classroom situation to allow teachers to give individual attention where required. The class and subject teachers will also have to be aware of the range of special education services which will be available if the Warnock recommendations are implemented. It is only with such an outlook, knowledge and expertise that the bulk of one in five children with special educational needs can be catered for within the ordinary classroom for no matter how expert the specialist advice and support, they will fall on stoney ground if the class or subject teacher is not oriented to the task in hand. I believe this is the crux of the matter as far as Warnock recommendations are concerned and it certainly is the view of the Scottish inspectorate as a result of their survey of pupils with learning difficulties. The class or subject teacher must not be seen as someone who has fulfilled his professional obligation to the child with special educational needs when he has referred that child to the specialist and we must

ensure that the structures we create for providing assistance to the child with special educational needs don't produce in an educational setting the medical model of the relationship of the general practitioner to the hospital consultant as it exists in this country today. We must retain a fully professional role for the class and subject teachers and not turn them into technicians.

The specialist teacher

I turn now to the specialist teacher in the school setting. After what I have said about the class and subject teacher you may well ask why we need a specialist teacher. This is simply because we need someone in the school setting who will focus specifically and positively on the needs of pupils with learning difficulties. If there is not someone with this function the pupils are more likely to continue to have such problems. Stage 2 assessment depends very much on there being this specialist to whom class and subject teachers can turn. We expect this teacher, through a rigorous and demanding training, to offer observation and assessment skills which will refine the problem and to possess a knowledge of curriculum and classroom management which will result in advice and/or a prescription of work whichfits the bill for the child and his teacher. This is why in Scotland we shall expect our specialists to have a basic qualification and experience in primary or secondary education before they train as specialists. They will demonstrate their skills as specialists in identification and assessment, in the interpretation of their own assessments and of the assessment of other professionals (e.g. educational psychologists), they will devise educational programmes for the child with the class and subject teachers and will supervise the progress of

the child in these programmes which will be put into practice either by the class or subject teacher or by the specialist teacher working with the pupil in the class situation or in a withdrawal situation. The Warnock Report envisages such specialists working from and in units or resources centres in the school. They will establish good working relationships with relevant supporting professionals such as the educational psychologists, social worker, clinical medical officer, peripatetic or advisory teacher. An important professional skill will be knowing the service which such supporting staff can provide and demanding it. Such expectations can only improve the service provided.

The peripatetic teacher and special school teacher

The specialist teacher I have described will be a specialist in learning difficulties of a mild and/or moderate degree and/or someone with a knowledge and understanding of emotional and behaviour problems. In order to deal with the sensory and physical disabilities of children who are integrated in the mainstream and to advise on and teach the severely physically and sensorily disabled as well as those children with a severe degree of learning difficulty or with a combination of less severe disabilities it is necessary to have a force of highly trained teachers specialising in the management and education of these children. These teachers will serve in special schools or as members of a peripatetic teaching force or do both. They will visit ordinary schools to provide highly specialised advice to class and subject teachers and to specialists in learning difficulties in respect of problems encountered. In addition I expect these special school teachers to combine with their specialist colleagues in ordinary schools in contributing to pre-service and in-service training courses for class

and subject teachers. They will, in this way, help to spread the knowledge and expertise already referred to and in time cut down the number of referrals at stage 2. Moreover, such training will also serve to inform class and subject teachers of the range of services available and of the need to use these services as required. Warnock sees the special schools as resource centres and I have indicated ways in which special school teachers will be an extremely important resource.

There are, however, some additional important roles for the peripatetic and special school teachers. They will be at the centre of a team of people involved in the education and care of children with moderate and severe degrees of disability and/or learning difficulties and have to be trained to use such a team. They will liaise with psychologists, social workers, doctors, physiotherapists, speech therapists and occupational therapists. Because of the nature of the problems they deal with they are likely to be involved with the child and his family from an early age and will have to be trained to help the parents to fulfill their role as the principal educators of their child in the earliest years. This will involve the use of the child's home as a learning environment and will require skills not well developed in the Scottish context of educating parents to function as teachers of their own children. The continuing involvement of the parents will necessitate a change in the approach of staff in some special schools. The special school and peripatetic teachers will also develop community links in order to secure community interest and involvement as a means of combating the negative attitudes to disability which exist at present there. They will liaise with colleagues in further and higher education and in community education in order to ensure that education continues beyond the

school leaving age. As if these were not enough roles for the teacher to play, I have one other to mention - namely as a researcher. I expect to see a growth of valuable empirical investigation being conducted by our specialist teachers. They will receive training for this in their specialist courses and in on-going in-service training and will I trust register for the higher degrees and qualifications which Warnock recommends.

There is a bright future for special school teachers and other specialist teachers in the post-Warnock era and what is equally important and tied up with it - a bright future for children with special educational needs.

"Those who work with children with special educational needs should regard themselves as having a crucial and developing role in a society which is now committed. not merely to tending and caring for its handicapped members, as a matter of charity, but to educating them as a matter of right and to developing their potential to the full." (Special Educational Needs)

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